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04 August 2021

Version of attached file:

Accepted Version

Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

Citation for published item:

Prendergast, David (2021) 'An investigation into the impact of dialogic teaching and Socratic questioning on the development of children's understanding of complex historical concepts.', in *Imagining Better Education: Conference Proceedings 2020*. , pp. 108-120. *Imagining Better Education*.

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An investigation into the impact of dialogic teaching and Socratic questioning on the development of children's understanding of complex historical concepts

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Teachers use questioning to enhance students' learning in the subject of history for all ages. Effective teachers plan their questioning and develop precocity in dealing with students' responses. Students demonstrate interest in dialogue and teachers report high levels of participation in classroom discussions.

This pilot study investigates teacher attitudes towards questioning in general and towards Socratic questioning. Socratic questioning is a systematic and targeted approach that seeks to promote greater understanding of subject matter at a group and an individual level. Teachers report their views of a given set of dialogic approaches, they expressed strong preferences for teacher talk and extended questioning. The full study will take this forward and will develop an example of Socratic questioning to use in target schools.

Keywords: history; dialogic pedagogy; complex concepts

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Introduction

History is perhaps one of the most contested school subjects and history teachers must navigate complex challenges in their work. At its most basic level this debate revolves around the extent to which schools should teach a version of “Our Island’s Story”: (Marshall, 2008) an overview that follows the trajectory of linear positive development towards the present day. These accounts are the study of white, English history which excludes many groups such as people of colour, women, and other underrepresented groups. These debates have entered the public consciousness with the demand to re-evaluate the legend and image of key figures in the history of the UK such as Cecil Rhodes and Winston Churchill. Although not new there are attempts to address these problems through months dedicated to black history month and LGBT history month. Even if there is space for non-English history, this is often seen through the eyes of a settled rather than a contested space. The curriculum is increasingly being asked to maintain the centrality of English history whilst at the same time giving appropriate space to other perspectives such as people of colour, LGBT issues, non-mainstream cultures, religious pluralism, gender issues and post-colonialism. Curriculum designers also need to consider depth versus overview, considering that most children in England have only one hour of history each week for Key Stage 3 (Burn et al., 2018). Provision for history is patchy, some schools teach history as a discrete subject all the way up to GCSE, but some schools adopt Integrated Humanities.

Amongst the history teaching community there is concern over the extent to which the history curriculum allows for the development of second order concepts such as change and continuity, similarity and difference, causes and consequences and interpretations and explanations (Fielding, 2015).

Role of interest and affective aspects

Bergin (1999) considered the role of interest and emotions in the learning processes. As history specialists we are already convinced that all history is interesting. This is what motivates teachers

to try and motivate students. Positive affect is a necessary component of interest and can help to sustain engagement over several lessons on the same topic. Effective teachers revisit their lesson planning, at least annually, in order to meet the individual needs of different students. Learning at all levels can be fun but also needs to be disciplined and structured. Sometimes there is the need to bed down and try to grapple complex information in a way that means concerted individual action. Part of the role of the teacher is to facilitate students' moves towards their own in-depth knowledge and understanding. Synonyms of the word 'interest' include attention, curiosity, and engagement. Challenge is a feature of interest and can be sustained through the use of a high-level questioning strategy such as Socratic questioning. Belongingness or group identity can be inculcated into learning by a teacher who understands the social and emotional perspectives, people have interest in things if they have cultural relevance. What interests individual students depends on their individual schema: this determines how they see their schoolwork and how they feel about any difficulties they may have.

Research has shown teachers ask hundreds of questions. Most of these are closed, seeking a specific pre-determined answer (Tienken et al., 2018). This is sometimes described as finding out what is in the teacher's head. The model of questioning in schools tends to follow the IRF model: initiation-responsive-feedback. In this model there is a reluctance to sit with ambiguity or conceptual difficulties. There is little scope for answers outside of what the teacher intends in their questions and there is little place for silence. Studies show that teachers respond to silence or tangential answers by answering their own questions.

Dialogic pedagogy

All learning is located in a social, cultural, and historical context. Naturalistic observation is believed to provide insight into internal cognitive processes. Bruner (1996) has argued that learning takes place as a communal activity sharing of the culture. He suggests educators have underestimated children's innate predisposition to particular kinds of interactions.

Alexander is the seminal writer on dialogical pedagogy (Alexander, 2018). He suggests that there is no single and agreed definition of the term "dialogic teaching". He suggests: "... a pedagogy of the spoken word that is manifestly distinctive while being grounded in widely accepted evidence and in discourse and assumptions that have much in common" (Alexander 2018 p. 2) It is not that all types of talk are dialogical, it is inherent that both students and teachers are engaged in an active, dynamic and knowledge producing conversation. It is largely through teacher-talk that student talk is facilitated, mediated, and probed. Although teachers

remain gatekeepers to what is discussed, the teacher remains an equal partner in the discourse. What ultimately counts is the extent to which instruction requires students to think, not just report someone else's thinking, to avoid the tendency to use questioning to guess what is in the teacher's head. If an answer does not give rise to a new question from itself, it falls out of the dialogue. Teachers sometimes believe that interventions are too short to achieve a discernible effect on pupils' learning. Dialogic teaching is longitudinal in its origins and in its outcome.

Nature and style of Socratic questioning (SQ)

Socratic questioning, also called Socratic maieutic (Brunschwig et al., 2006) is a disciplined, systematic approach to the acquisition of new knowledge and the development of deep knowledge. When used with students it can build on their simple answers to open questions and consolidate their learning. Socratic questioning can serve as a model for students to extend their own knowledge and understanding – they ask themselves questions and develop ever more sophisticated knowledge.

SQs that might be used in history could be:

- why do you say that?
- what point of view does this writer have? Do you agree with them?
- Do you agree with X? Please explain.

It is suggested (Davies and Sinclair, 2014) that Socratic questioning improves student's engagement as it builds on their individual position and relates this to a wider communal view. However, there is a tension between allowing freedom within the dialogical discussions for the students and the level of intervention from the teacher.

Role of the teacher

I was struck by a revelation that although I might be teaching something, this does not mean children are learning it. I was humbled when in a quiz on a school trip my 6th formers couldn't remember the Norman Invasion when I am sure I taught it! Now, suitably chastised by the incident I am a 2nd Year PhD student in the School of Education at Durham University, I began my career as a teacher in 1995 and worked as a teacher in schools in challenging circumstances, (schools like the one I attended) including working in a setting for very young offenders and a Pupil Referral Unit. This speaks to the aspect of positionality of the researcher. I am the first member of my family to attend university and I was privileged to attend Russell Group

universities. I am interested in the extent to which teachers need to have high expectations of their students' academic achievement and post-18 destinations. This study is predicated on the notion that young people can hold on to complex ideas as long as they are presented in an age-appropriate manner and are supported by a skilled teacher who has a firm grasp of subject knowledge and concurrent pedagogy, both subject specific and generally.

“For the teacher, it means partially relinquishing control of the flow of discussion, the habit of evaluating each student contribution like students to initiate what outstanding the development to contribute” (Alexander, 2018, p. 9) There is still a crucial role for the teacher as an expert in terms of conceptual and technical knowledge and the ability to use metaphor, allegory, and examples. From a European point of view, talking is a positive act, a positive impact expression of individual basic means of communication. From a Socratic perspective, knowledge is within that is to be recovered through verbal reasoning; some concepts are not easily verbalizable. In East Asia silence and introspection are considered beneficial. East Asians tend to use holistic thinking would be negatively affected by talking. As history is mediated through talking, it is hypothesized that dialogue encourages the development of a multi-layered account or argument.

Bergin (1999) focussed on the promotion of personal interests and engagement. Intrinsic motivation is said to be person (individual) centred but it is also related to group motivation. In the dialogic classroom, groups and individuals collaborate to produce a synthesis of historical accounts or arguments. Synonyms of the word ‘interest’ include attention, curiosity, and engagement.

Teachers often find it difficult to embrace new ideas in their teaching but value learning alongside their teacher peers (van Schaik et al., 2019). Three approaches to knowledge, co-construction in teacher learning groups was found: practice based, research informed, research based. Practice based groups knowledge is predominantly constructed in the exchanging of knowledge, views, ideas, and experiences from participants-it is intrinsically Socratic.

Research questions

The research questions in this study have come about after an iterative process informed by the literature. These initial questions may indeed change again as evidence is accumulated through the fieldwork, in particular, through the teacher interviews and observation of lessons. My

interest in Socratic questioning began with feedback on my own teaching that I was practicing the technique.

Research questions for the pilot:

1. How do teachers engage children effectively in dialogue?
2. What distinguishes dialogue styles from each other and from other forms of inquiry used by teachers?
3. What are the implications for practice? Will teachers be more willing to employ dialogic techniques in their teaching.

Method

Table 1: Research methods pilot study

Research Questions	Method	Evidence
How do teachers engage children effectively in dialogue?	Teacher interview Lesson observation	Teachers' views of their own practice. Questions and answers observed in lessons.
What distinguishes dialogue styles from each other and from other forms of inquiry used by teachers?	Systematic literature review	Studies of teacher practice and interventions, scored as to usefulness and relevance.
What are the implications for practice?	Assessment of the impact of the toolkit on teaching and learning and summary of the study	Emphasis on practical impact of the study

The pilot

Due to the coronavirus outbreak, it has proven impossible to complete any fieldwork in schools. Firstly, there was a short Likert-scale questionnaire distributed through web-based groups of history teachers in secondary schools. The survey presented thirteen pedagogic approaches to questioning and teacher presentation. These included: teacher talk/storytelling, (also known as “exposition” or “instruction”), open ended individual questions and the use of written and visual primary sources. The questions looked at the themes of enjoyment, student achievement, teachers' views of dialogic techniques, and teachers' perception of difficulties in history

learning, for example if they thought students found some concepts challenging, or some techniques, such as probing questioning, difficult or uncomfortable. There was also the opportunity to write in examples of dialogic teaching from their practice. The survey took between five and ten minutes to complete. Participants were asked if they were willing to take part in the interview phase. Ten teachers expressed a willingness to take part in the semi-structured interview.

The interview was relatively short, lasting typically 20-25 minutes. Participants were sent the questions in advance. For convenience, the interviews took part on Zoom. Although there is some research on online interviewing (Peters et al., 2020), there are few studies that address the problem of teacher interviews directly. In the climate of ever increasingly performative regime, teachers respond with varying degrees of candour. It can be expected that such research would come forward in the global pandemic as online work replaces face to face contact. It is perhaps the case that online interviewing is a growing area of research methods in education. For this study I found the Zoom platform easy to use and the participants seemed to find the process unobtrusive and satisfactory. There are issues with interviewing at a distance. In natural conversation speakers speak over each other, ending sentences and concurring or not with speakers. A drawback of interviewing online is that there is a possibility of losing extracts of the video due to bandwidth. In this study only a small part of one interview was affected. Interviews had a focus on students and their experience of learning history. Questions included whether students found aspects of questioning challenging and how they use questioning in their practice. They were finally asked what aspects of questioning practice they would like to take forward. Although the results were interesting, the interviews were quite short, affected by distancing and focused on students.

The responses reveal the centrality of teachers' applied craft knowledge of what is required to make progress in history. Although they appear to engage in co-construction of knowledge, the teachers here like to maintain overall control of the learning environment. This is not unsurprising, as allowing students to engage in new forms of learning and any new approach to studying is risky. Beginning teachers (a term that applies to pre-service/student teachers, Newly Qualified Teachers (NQT) and up to five years of teaching) and experienced practitioners sometimes engage in defensive teaching (McNeil, 1982). "They choose to simplify content and reduce demands on students in return for classroom order and minimal student compliance on assignments" (McNeil, 1982, p. 3). Beginning teachers are fearful of being seen as weak in terms of classroom management and will plan excessively, individual

student/teacher interaction means less time at the front of the classroom controlling students (Kyriacou & Kunc, 2007). Although classroom control is less of a worry in 6th Form, beginning teachers might worry about their subject knowledge and older adolescents often test their teachers' tenacity in sticking to the planned lesson. Subject teachers often feel that using their subject specific knowledge to engage students in the overarching story or narrative is one of the most rewarding aspects of teaching history. Working with younger students can involve some creativity in designing learning around a subject specific activity, by dramatizing the Battle of Hastings or the Trial of Charles I. Knowledge retention is stronger when a teacher's talk is supplemented by music, film, and participation in a dialogue with each other and the teacher (Snelson et al., 2012).

Teachers' perceptions of their practice depend to a greater or lesser extent on their ability to transfer knowledge to their students and for this knowledge and understanding to be demonstrated is some form of assessment. This is a tension for teachers, they want students to enjoy their studies and not to be too focussed on impending assessment. There has been an increasing number of schools using a two-year Key Stage 3 and the abolition of levels of attainment have led to the use of GCSE assessment style in earlier years (Burn et al., 2018) and this creates a tension for teachers who don't want to end students' compulsory history education with yet another GCSE practice paper. There is also an issue with how to approach the end of Key Stage 3; as students have to contend with difficult and issues such as the Holocaust and the Second World War in the same year as they study soporific ideas such as changes in roads and canals. Teachers choose GCSE content based on what proved interesting at Key Stage 3, this is why there are many GCSE content choices that focus on the era of the Second World War. Teachers may also feel the need to balance the traumatic and highly emotive subjects of the Holocaust and post-colonial strife in the former colonies with more positive stories such as the role played by people of colour in re-building Britain. At this crucial stage, the end of compulsory history; history teachers are gate keepers of the culture and hence carry a heavy responsibility. There is a huge variety of artefacts from the past that can help students to enjoy their history study. The difference in using images as opposed to written is also not surprising. Powerful visual images, such as the iconic raising of the Red Flag on the Reichstag at the end of the Second World War can convey much but must be used with caution, as they are still objects of their time. The Soviet authorities were secretive about these images and this has led to claims that the images were staged. Staged or not, the large number of photographs give teachers a huge range of sources to build lessons on, for example the use of

images in the development of collective national consciousness. They are also a good example of how the distinction between primary and secondary sources is not always helpful.

The issue of provenance is much more pertinent in the development and use of film. All films are interpretations and reveal as much about the director as it does about the story being told. A well-made balanced account in film, such as ‘Gandhi’ can help with students understanding of the whole of Gandhi’s life and the events at the end of British rule in India.

Students do need help in adopting a critical stance that sees films as interpretations of history and not value-free accounts. It is not particularly helpful, in these circumstances, to distinguish between primary and secondary sources. Sources need to be studied through the prism of a critical reader, even if this has to be differentiated to meet the needs of younger students or those with low level reading skills. Visual media do help to increase understanding of events being studied, though at an advanced level these accounts need to be engaged with critically.

When asked about attainment, teachers seem to hold a connection between enjoyment and understanding. Whilst I maintain my position that enjoyment and achievement are connected, sometimes students have to work their way through a long, written source for example. The teachers in the study maintained limited support for written elements in the accomplishment of achievement in history. In seeking to establish whether the planned learning has been successful then individual closed questions can help students to build up their learning and increase their understanding. The problem is that there is little, if any time for individual closed questions in a full class of 30. It can be argued, perhaps counterintuitively, that older students in smaller classes at GCSE and A Level might have more time to work with longer texts, including where appropriate, whole texts such as textbooks and works of significant works within the historiography of the period.

Participants offered support for open questioning, with one pointing out the role that open questioning can have into producing scaffolding of extended written accounts, using the scaffold as a plan. An issue of importance for teacher is maintaining the interest and involvement of all students. Initiation-response-feedback, or IRF, is a pattern of discussion between the teacher and learner that are largely controlled by the teacher. Studies show there is a very short (5-10 seconds) period of silence before with answering the question herself or reformulating the question. One participant gave out lolly sticks for students to write their name on and used these to select respondents rather than allowing students to “bid” for answers. For this to work the classroom rapport and mutual support among students needs to be very solid.

Teachers also need to be comfortable with silence. It is ironic that a study of dialogue includes suggestions on the role of silence! When asked to give examples of dialogic teaching not all participants responded, supplying further evidence that dialogic teaching is not as engrained in the teacher's day to day practice. However, the responses should that when the dialogic approach is applied the pedagogy of talk is evident, one participant offered Socratic questioning without prompting. Although Bloom's Taxonomy is widely used, its place within a dialogic approach is less clear, with authors tending towards 'repertoires of pedagogy' (Kim & Wilkinson, 2019), which is better at conceptualising students' thinking rather than their output in response to a pre-planned literacy based assessment.

In response to criticism about high teacher workload, the UK government encouraged the production of 'off the shelf' units of work that can be easily taught, perhaps even by non-subject specialists. This presents a challenge for dialogic teaching as it depends, as the teachers in this study attest, it needs to be responsive to students' authentic, spontaneous talk.

As this study advertised itself as a piece of research into dialogic teaching, it is not surprising that they were open and engaged about their teaching in relation to dialogue. The essential rapport that all responses seem to point to create authentic dialogue. The teachers' skilful probing and guiding of students towards shared learning and understanding.

The concepts identified as challenging for students to come to terms with is of no surprise. The development of an understanding of the term "monarchy" takes years to achieve, from a naïve, simplistic, and quite literal understanding in Year 7 to a complex, ambiguous, and multi-faceted in 6th Form. Dialogic teaching is a powerful way to address these ambiguities, as they are focussed on students' oral outcomes which develop over time.

Conclusion

The work discussed here is part of a wider piece of research into the impact of dialogic pedagogy on students' understanding of complex historical concepts. One thing that is clear is that there is no way of simplifying dialogic pedagogy and for it to have any impact at all, more teachers need to be aware of it and be willing to use it. What is clear is that the pedagogy of talk is not just about students chatting about their work but is part of an overarching narrative or arch of a period. It also evident that source-based work can be enhanced by developing a dialogic approach that is able to deal with, for example, ambiguity in the sources. What is now

needed is to study the application of dialogic teaching in interaction with their students, and discussions with young people on the issues raised in their historical studies.

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